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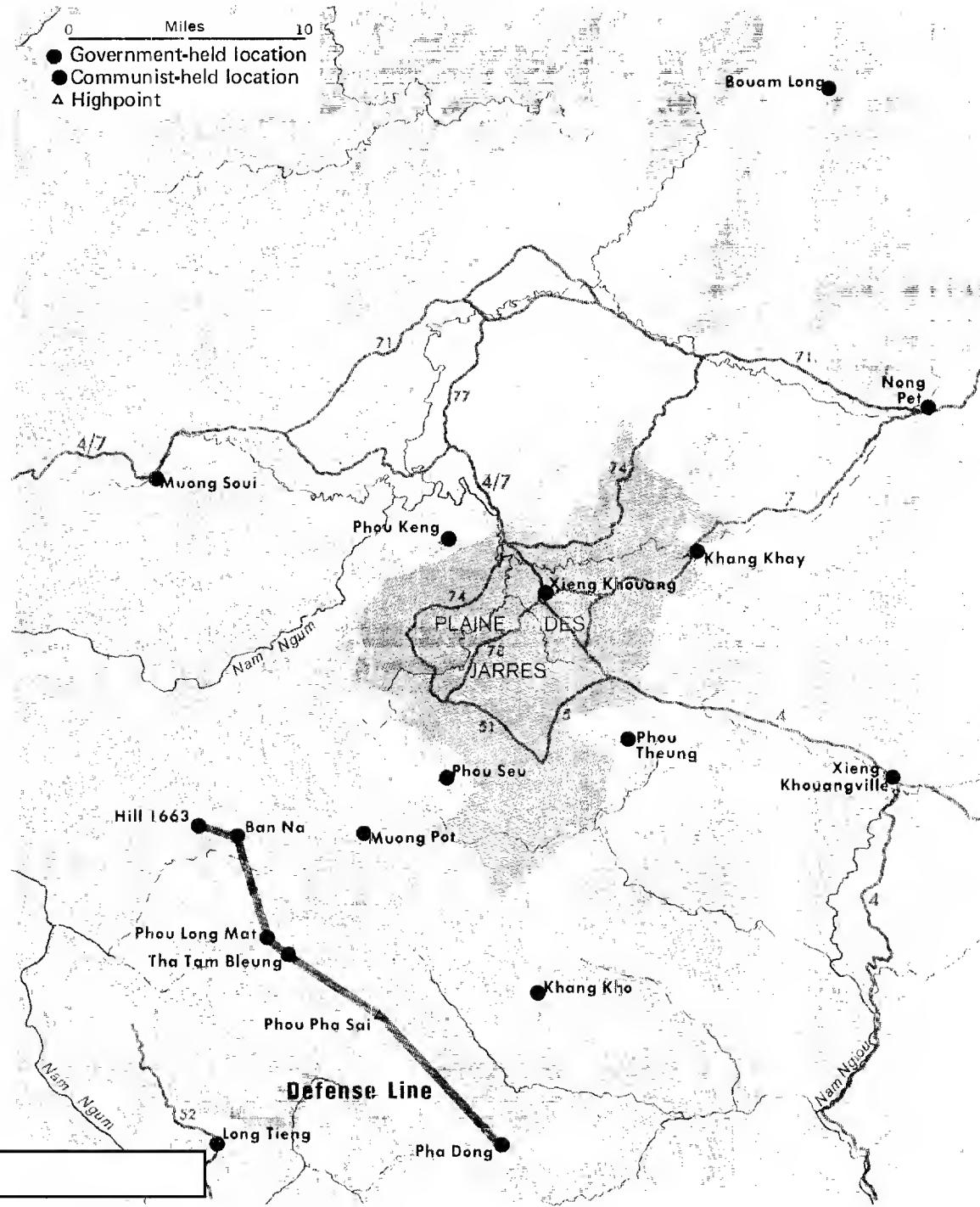
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LAOS: The North Vietnamese appear to be taking advantage of bad weather, which is hampering air strikes and reconnaissance, to move their forces into position for a drive against the defenses around Long Tieng.

US pilots reported heavy enemy movement southward across the Plaine on 22 December, and it appears clear that the irregular positions near Ban Na and Tha Tam Bleung are to be among the North Vietnamese targets. The Communists may also be displacing forward the 130-mm. field guns that they used to hit the irregular fire support bases on the Plaine.

Irregular troops, meanwhile, are continuing to filter back into friendly lines near Long Tieng where they are being resupplied and reorganized. One group of 500 men withdrawing from the Phou Seu area reported clashing with North Vietnamese units east of Ban Na, but no details are yet available.

Incomplete casualty figures indicate that irregular units had at least 80 killed and 470 wounded during the recent fighting on the Plaine. Some 1,000-1,200 men are still missing, and many of them are believed to be either killed or captured. In addition, all of the irregulars' heavy weapons--ten 155-mm. and nine 105-mm. howitzers--have been lost, as well as five armored cars, five trucks, and miscellaneous other heavy equipment. North Vietnamese casualties are estimated at 400 to 600 killed and over 1,000 wounded.

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INDIA-PAKISTAN: The Biharis in Dacca appear to be facing increasingly grim prospects.

The US Consul General reports that about 100,000 Biharis--non-Bengali East Pakistanis who generally supported Islamabad--are living in a state of terror on the outskirts of Dacca. Despite efforts by the Indian Army and the Mukti Bahini, anarchy reigns in the area with criminal elements looting, killing and torturing freely. The food situation for the Biharis has become critical and the Consul General believes that many face death by starvation or violence unless international pressure is brought to bear on the problem. The senior Indian commander in Dacca apparently does not yet realize the gravity of the situation. The new Bangla Desh government so far apparently has made no effort to alleviate the problem.

Information on the status of Biharis elsewhere is fragmentary. According to the press, foreign travelers report that massacres in outlying areas are beginning to taper off.

The US Embassy in Islamabad reports that President Bhutto has already set the stage for an attempt to reshape Pakistan's domestic and foreign policies. There are signs that he intends to build a highly personal, somewhat authoritarian regime, and he appears to be in complete control, in part because of the demoralization of the previous leadership. Social reform, redistribution of wealth and populist assaults on the establishment apparently will be major aspects of his domestic strategy.

[Bhutto has indicated he is not bound by the inflexible East Pakistan policy of his predecessors. According to the press, Bangla Desh President Mujibur Rahman--for nine months a prisoner of the Yahya government--has been taken to Rawalpindi for talks with the new Pakistani president.]

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The Embassy believes that Bhutto is going to chart a new course in relations with India. His insistence that East Pakistan is still part of the country is for domestic consumption only.

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CUBA: Castro has asserted publicly that Cuba's seizure of the two Panamanian-flag ships stemmed from concern that a new wave of exile operations against Cuba was imminent.

In a lengthy speech on 22 December, reminiscent of some of Castro's most strident anti-US performances of the past, the Cuban leader railed against what he termed US culpability in 12 years of "pirate attacks" against Cuba. He reiterated that Cuba would do what was necessary to defend itself against such activities, which long have been a source of genuine concern to the regime. He also implied strongly that if such "defensive" measures were to result in a violent incident involving the US, "it would be incidental, accidental, and imperialism would be responsible."

Castro's show of anger probably was calculated primarily to shore up flagging domestic support and to arouse foreign sympathy for his regime. He has often used this tactic with considerable effectiveness in the past. For similar purposes, Havana can be expected to play up any allegations of US complicity that are made by the crews of the captured ships before they are released by the Cubans.

In commenting on the fate of US citizen Jose Villa Diaz, captain of the Johnny Express, Castro said that he would be placed "at the disposal of Cuban authorities" to answer for his "numerous illegal acts" against Cuba. He went on to indicate, however, that any leniency shown toward Villa would stem from such factors as the attitudes shown by Villa's relatives still in Cuba, a comment that suggests that the regime may be prepared to show clemency.

The Panamanian Government has accepted a Cuban proposal to go to Havana to discuss the ship seizures. A three-man delegation departed for Cuba yesterday afternoon

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NOTES

CUBA-USSR: The arrival in Moscow of President Osvaldo Dorticos on 21 December may be related to the annual Cuban-Soviet trade talks now under way in Moscow. Dorticos' trip follows visits to Cuba by high-level Soviet economic delegations in April and September of this year. Several other Cuban economic officials are accompanying the Cuban president, who is also minister of economy and director of the Cuban economic planning board. Negotiations may be more difficult than before because of unusual Soviet dissatisfaction with the state of the Cuban economy.

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OMAN: Prime Minister Tariq is expected to resign soon, perhaps during a three-week leave of absence to begin next week. Sultan Qabus, who deposed his father as ruler of Oman in July 1970, has been attempting to limit the cabinet's importance. The Sultan's goal is to centralize power in the palace, while Prime Minister Tariq wishes to turn the sultanate into a constitutional monarchy.

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